



## West Coast Groundfish Observer Program

### Focus Questions:

- How is the WCGOP structured?
- What are the qualifications for WCGOP Observers?
- What are the duties of a WCGOP Observer?
- What type of gear does a WCGOP Observer use?
- What is the routine of WCGOP Observers?

### Chapter Outline:

- I. WCGOP Management Structure
- II. Observer Qualification
- III. Observer Personal Equipment
- IV. Observer Sampling and Safety Gear
- V. Observer Life

## I. WCGOP Management Structure

The West Coast Observer Program is a cooperative effort between NOAA Fisheries, Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC), Washington, Oregon and California.



### **NOAA Fisheries**

NOAA Fisheries is responsible for Observer training, debriefing, field coordination, and data analysis. NOAA Fisheries staff includes a team leader, a database manager, field coordinators, and debriefers.



### **PSMFC**

PSMFC is responsible for selecting the Observer contractor, managing the contract, data editing, and Observer gear purchase, maintenance, and distribution. PSMFC staff includes a project manager, a half-time state coordinator in each state, and data editors.

### **Washington, Oregon and California**

Half-time state coordinators act as liaisons between each state's fish and wildlife department and the WCGOP. They are responsible for coordinating with shore-side samplers, providing current information on vessel activities, facilitating meetings between Observers and vessel crew, and assisting NOAA Fisheries in ensuring designated vessels have obtained a United States Coast Guard (USCG) safety decal.



### **Alaskan Observers, Inc.**

Alaskan Observers, Inc. (AOI) hires the Observers and provides them health insurance and additional insurance coverage while at-sea or working shore-side. AOI is responsible for scheduling vacation and leave without pay. They are also responsible for travel arrangements between ports.

## II. Observer Qualifications

### NOAA Fisheries Approval for Observers

To become a NOAA Fisheries-approved Observer for the WCGOP, three steps must be successfully completed:

1. Training.
2. Demonstration of proficiency during each trip.
3. Satisfactory performance evaluations.



### Standards of Conduct

WCGOP Observers have an important image to maintain since they represent professional scientists for NOAA Fisheries, AOI and PSMFC. Observers must avoid behaving in any manner that could adversely affect the public's confidence in the integrity of the Observer Program, the data provided, or other Observers. Since Observers reside in the same small communities as their vessel crews, maintaining a business-like attitude both on and off the vessel is very important. Expected behavior includes, but is not limited to, the following:

1. Observers must maintain an unbiased and/or neutral approach to fisheries management issues while on the job and avoid declaring a pro-fishing or a pro-environmental stance.
2. Observers must diligently perform their assigned duties.
3. Observers must accurately record their sampling data, write complete reports, and report honestly any suspected violations of regulations relevant to the conservation of marine resources, or their environment.

4. Observers must not disclose collected data, observations made on board a vessel, or observations made in a processing facility to any person except the owner of the observed permit, an authorized officer, or NOAA Fisheries.
5. Observers must not engage in any illegal actions or any other activities that would reflect negatively on their image as professional scientists, on other Observers, or on the WCGOP as a whole. This includes, but is not limited to:
  - Engaging in excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages.
  - Engaging in the use or distribution of illegal drugs.
  - Becoming physically or emotionally involved with vessel personnel.

Any behavior contrary to these standards, or the intent of these standards, is grounds for disqualification. Falsification of data is grounds for immediate disqualification and may be a basis for prosecution.

### **Conflict of Interest**



Observers are required to maintain an unbiased role by limiting their financial interest in the fishery. Observers must abide by the following conflict of interest standards:

1. Observers may not have a direct financial interest, other than the provision of Observer services, in a West Coast fishery, including, but not limited to:
  - Involvement in the catching or processing of products from the fishery either by vessels or shore-side facilities.

- Involvement in the selling of supplies or services to these vessels or shore-side facilities.
  - Involvement in the purchasing of raw or processed products from these vessels or shore-side facilities.
2. Observers may not solicit or accept, directly or indirectly, any gratuity, gift, favor, entertainment, loan, or anything of monetary value from anyone who conducts activities that are regulated by NOAA Fisheries, or who has interests that may be substantially affected by the performance or non-performance of the Observers' official duties. (Note that this standard restricts Observers from accepting home-packed fish without purchase.)
  3. Observers may not serve as an Observer on any vessel owned or operated by a person who previously employed the Observer.
  4. Observers may not solicit or accept employment as a crewmember or an employee of a vessel or shore-side processor in a West Coast Groundfish fishery while under contract with an Observer contractor.

### **Confidentiality**

Permit owners may ask to see the paperwork collected from the vessel. Observers may share all collected data, **except the Observer Logbook**, with the **owner** of the permit. Only the permit owner, NOAA Fisheries staff, and the Observer are allowed to see the data collected. Never allow crew from one boat to see any data from another vessel and **never take data from one vessel onto another vessel.**

## II. Observer Personal Equipment

A list of clothes and belongings Observers may want to bring to sea is provided below. If Observers have questions on what to bring to sea, ask for advice from the WCGOP staff or an active Observer in the program. Rather than taking a lot of clothes, focus on bringing items that can be layered. Dressing to work on the deck of a vessel off the West Coast is challenging—usually, the conditions are cold (45°F) and wet, but in the summer there are days when the outside temperature can reach the 70's. Layering will help protect Observers from the elements and will ensure that Observers don't get overheated if the weather gets warm. Synthetic or wool materials are recommended and will keep Observers warmer than cotton. Inexpensive clothes are also recommended, since the smell of fish is difficult to remove from fabric. Some Observers find appropriate, inexpensive work clothes at Army-Navy Surplus or used-clothing stores.

### Considerations for Fishing Trips



- Observers will be exposed to wet conditions, even when it's not raining.
- Observers must be prepared for hot and cold temperatures and for quick weather changes.
- When working on deck Observers may be exposed to strong wind conditions.
- There will be a LIMITED amount of space aboard the vessel.
- Sea bags (small duffel bags are ideal) should be packed so that items can be easily accessed.
- Observer may or may not have a bunk.

- Vessels may not have a head (bathroom) or a shower.
- If Observers have dietary restrictions discuss them with the captain and/or the cook before departing.

### **Observer Personal Gear**

Here are some suggestions for personnel gear needed while at-sea:

- Toiletries (towel, soap, toothbrush and tooth paste, deodorant, travel size shampoo, wet wipes)
- 2-3 pairs of socks
- Clothes that can be layered for warm weather (thermal, sweatshirt, fleece)
- Sleeping bag/blanket
- Extra contact lenses or glasses
- Personal medications
- Reading material (books, magazines), radio/walkman with headphones
- Sunglasses, sun block and chap stick
- Baseball hat, cap
- Small first-aid kit
- Small pocketknife
- Flashlight with extra batteries
- Travel pillow
- Water



## IV. Observer Sampling and Safety Gear

NOAA Fisheries and PSMFC supply sampling and safety equipment. Observers should check sampling gear to see that it is in good working order when it is issued. It is the responsibility of each Observer to maintain their gear and return it in the best condition possible. Observers may be charged for misuse or neglect of sampling gear. Observers rely on their equipment to perform their duties so making gear cleaning and upkeep a daily routine is recommended.

### Scales

Observers are supplied with at least two scales:

- A 6.0-pound hand-held brass scale for items up to 6.0 pounds.
- A Chatillon platform scale for items weighing more than 6.0 pounds.



The Chatillon platform scales have a gauge that can be read to a tenth of a pound. Observers are expected to take accurate weights in the field. There may be circumstances when the most accurate reading is to the nearest pound. Document those instances in the Logbook.

### *How to Care for Sampling Gear*

1. Keep gear in a secure place aboard the vessel. Avoid leaving gear on the vessel's deck. If there is no alternative to leaving it out on deck, be sure that it is well secured.
2. Keep forms, books, pencils, pens, and unused equipment in a dry safe place, such as the forepeak, stateroom, or a secure lazarette.



3. Keep all gear as clean as possible. Use deck hoses to rinse slime, scales, and blood off the baskets, deck sheets, length boards, clipboards, scalpel, and knife after each use. Rinse gear with fresh water after each trip.
4. Keep metal parts clean and well oiled. The lubricant oil issued is food-grade and can be kept on deck.
5. Do not put scales, scalpels, knives, thumb counters, measuring tapes, or other metal objects in plastic bags or boxes when they are wet or they will rust.
6. The platform scale **MUST** be kept well oiled. Use the food grade lubricant oil on all moving parts **daily**. Use the Lanicoat spray on the underside of the scale and on the notched reading beam before and after trips (See Appendix T Chatillon Platform Scale Care and Maintenance).
7. If something does happen to the issued gear, document what happened in the Observer Logbook. Observers will not be charged for gear damage or loss due to uncontrollable, documented circumstances.
8. Keep sampling gear consolidated. This will minimize the chance of forgetting something when disembarking and will be appreciated by the vessel crew during the trip.
9. **Do not** take the laptop computer to sea and **do not** check it when traveling by air.
10. Safety equipment is provided to reduce reliance on the vessel's equipment. The immersion suit should be kept in a safe place that is dry and easily accessible. It is not a good idea to keep the suit with the crew's since it may not be easily accessible

and may be forgotten when disembarking. The immersion suit zipper must be waxed at least once a month to prevent sticking. It is important to retain original immersion suit issued at training.

The majority of sampling gear will be issued at training (See Appendix N List of Observer Issued Equipment). If replacement gear is required, contact the PSMFC or the WCGOP coordinator.

## **V. Observer Life**

There are three phases in a West Coast Groundfish Observers life:

1. Training
2. Vessel Deployment, Data Collection, and Data Entry
3. Debriefing

### **Training**

A two-week training course is required of all Observers new to the WCGOP. The course consists of an overview of sampling procedures, species identification, safety training, conflict resolution training, training in the use of a web-based data entry application, small boat etiquette, and general support information. Trainees must pass a series of tests and homework assignments to demonstrate their understanding of:

- Observer priorities and duties
- Methods of independent catch estimation
- Proper recording of data

- Methods of sampling and recording species composition data for both retained and discarded catch
- Fish identification and use of dichotomous keys
- Gender determination and measurement of fish
- Procedures for collection of age structures
- Ability to use the web-based data entry application
- Applications of volume, weight, density, and extrapolation calculations
- Safety and survival skills

In order to receive NOAA Fisheries-approval, trainees must attend and participate in every class, pass exams, complete all homework, and make any corrections requested. Trainees must also pass a safety test including an on-land and in-water test of survival suit and life raft use. Additionally, trainees must be able to demonstrate that they have the attitude and ability required to perform a difficult job independently and to act professionally in stressful situations.

## **Vessel Deployment, Data Collection, and Data Entry**

### *Port and Vessel Assignments*

AOI will make Port assignments. Observers should have written understanding of payment and reimbursement agreements prior to leaving for their assigned port, since traveling along the coast in Washington, Oregon and California can be expensive, especially in the summer.



The port in which the Observer is living and possibly the surrounding ports will be the Observer's port group. Most of the vessel assignments will occur within this port group. However, travel to other port groups is frequently required.

### *Contacting Vessels*



Observers will be assigned a vessel by their coordinator or a lead Observer. Coordinators supply Observers with vessel names, skipper/owner names and phone numbers. Once this information is received, the Observer is responsible for completing the following tasks:

1. Contacting the vessel owner/captain.
  - When calling the vessel owner/captain, do so in a friendly but professional manner. State your name and association with the WCGOP. Make it a habit to introduce yourself to whoever answers the phone.

Hi, my name is Joe Smith. I am the West Coast Groundfish Observer in *Port Group*. Could I please speak with *Vessel Owner/Captain's Name*?

- The vessel owner/ captain will give information regarding approximate embarking date and time.

Information that should be acquired from the captain:

1. Vessel location (dock, plant, etc)
2. Departure date and time
3. Approximate length of trip
4. Vessel type/gear type (if not known)
5. If vessel has current USCG Safety Decal
6. Meeting time for vessel safety orientation

2. Completing a Vessel Safety Orientation Checklist. Document the date the USCG Vessel Safety Decal was issued, when the hydrostatic releases were checked, the last repacking of the life raft, etc. (See Observer Logbook for Vessel Safety Orientation Checklist.)
3. Mailing or faxing a copy of the Vessel Safety Orientation Checklist to the coordinator prior to departing on the first trip!
4. Arriving at the vessel at least 30 minutes prior to embarking time. Often, there will be an unforeseen delay but it's vital the Observer does not cause it!!
5. Calling the Observer Trip Notification Phone System (OTNPS) prior to embarking and upon return.

### *Observer Trip Notification Phone System*

The WCGOP utilizes a call-in system (available twenty-four hours per day, seven days a week) for Observers to report departures and returns from vessels. Since each Observer is issued a personal Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB), it is vital that NOAA Fisheries, PSMFC, and AOI are aware of when Observers are at sea in case the EPIRB is set off.

In the event an Observer's personal EPIRB goes off, the Coast Guard will contact NOAA Fisheries, PSMFC, or AOI and inquire if there is a real emergency. The OTNPS provides a simple and quick way for any of these groups to determine if the set off EPIRB accompanied an Observer to sea or not. The OTNPS potentially reduces the time it will take the U. S. Coast Guard to respond in a real emergency.

Observers will be required to phone Answering Northwest, Inc. at 206-444-4268 immediately prior to embarking on a vessel and immediately after disembarking a vessel. Upon embarkation, Observers will leave the following five pieces of information with an operator at the answering service:

Embarking:

1. First and last name
2. Vessel name
3. Departure port
4. Estimated time of departure
5. Estimated length of trip

**Note** - Observers do not need to include the date and time of the call, it will be recorded automatically by Answering Northwest, Inc.

Upon disembarking a vessel, the Observer will again need to call the answering service, and leave the following three pieces of information:

Disembarking:

1. First and last name
2. Vessel name
3. Arrival port

The time and date of the call will be recorded automatically.

**Remember**--Observers are required to notify Answering NW, Inc. before and after every trip even if the Observer has reported the departure or arrival to the coordinator. **There will be no exceptions to this routine.**



### *Data Collection*

Observers collect data for approximately two months and then debrief with program staff. During this two-month period, the Observer may be assigned to one or multiple vessels. Observers may also be observing multiple gear types. This means that multiple sampling methods may be employed. Observers should be familiar with the sampling protocols for the gear type before embarking on the trip. This will ensure the correct equipment and forms are brought and hopefully, ease some anxiety.

### *Data Entry*

Observers should budget a fair amount of time for data entry. Observers use the WCGOP Database to enter:

- **Data** – All data collected on vessels, including information on Trip Forms, Catch Forms, Species Composition Forms, Length Frequency Forms, Biospecimen Forms, and Marine Mammal and Seabird Sightings forms.
- **Activity** – Observers are responsible for recording their activity in the database. **Observers should have their activity entered no later than the 3<sup>rd</sup> of each month.**
- **Communications** – Observers are required to record all communications with vessels in the database.

### *Communications and Field Support*

The WCGOP has field stations in Seattle, Washington, Newport, Oregon, and Eureka, California that provide staff support for Observers. Observer coordinators contact new Observers after their first trip to discuss the vessel and sampling procedures.

If there are any problems, questions, or comments, call an **Observer coordinator or debriefer**. The coordinators/debriefers main purpose is to provide help and support to **Observers**. Use this resource!! A positive Observer/coordinator/debriefer relationship during deployment will provide for an easy end-of-period debriefing and a quick fix to problems encountered.

If **Observers** are ill, injured, cannot work, or are going to miss an assigned trip, contact **AOI** and an **Observer coordinator** immediately.

### **Debriefing**

Debriefings may be extended to 4-month periods for qualified Observers.

When a two-month trip period is completed, a debriefing will be scheduled. The purpose of debriefing is to:

- Describe the methods used to collect data.
- Inform WCGOP staff of any problems encountered.
- Make corrections or changes to the data.
- Get recommendations for future cruises.
- Receive a written performance evaluation.
- Replenish gear.

Prior to debriefing, Observers should complete the following tasks:

- Double-check all data for errors.
- Run Trip Error Report.
- Send data.

### *Sending Data*

Observers will be FEDEXing their data to a lead Observer or debriefer. Data should be sent at the end of each two-month period or when requested by WCGOP staff. Data should be organized **by trip** in the following order:

1. Trip Form(s)
2. Catch Form(s), Species Composition Form(s), Length Frequency Form(s), Biospecimen Form(s)
3. Trip Discard Form(s)
4. Marine Mammal Sighting, Tagged Fish, and/or Seabird Sighting Form(s)

Also include,

5. Logbook
6. Species Identification Forms

A debriefer will set up an interview appointment with the Observer. The meeting with the debriefer includes:

- Interview
- Data Corrections
- Evaluation

### *Interview*

The debriefing interview is a vital part of the Observer's contract. It allows the WCGOP to get feedback from the Observer and provides an opportunity for Observers to discuss sampling methods and ask for suggestions if problems were encountered. It is also an opportunity to give personal insights to WCGOP personnel. The interview is the Observer's chance to demonstrate their understanding of the methods learned in training and their proficiency at applying them in the field.

### *Data Corrections*

All mistakes that are found in the error check or during the interview will be corrected at the debriefing. Both the paper and electronic copies of the data will need to be corrected.

### *Evaluation*

Observers receive evaluations for each debriefing. The debriefers are responsible for completing evaluations in a timely manner and for soliciting input from other staff members who work directly with the Observer. Observers are evaluated on 8 categories. Each category has criteria that are considered in the evaluation. The categories and criteria are:

#### **Category 1: Sampling Procedures**

*Criteria A:* Proper sampling procedures employed

*Criteria B:* Random sampling implemented and documented

#### **Category 2: Data Forms**

*Criteria A:* Forms are complete

*Criteria B:* Forms are legible

*Criteria C:* Forms are organized

*Criteria D:* Forms are relatively error free

*Criteria E:* Data documentation is consistent

*Criteria F:* Fish ticket numbers are present

*Criteria G:* Vessel logbook numbers are present when required

*Criteria H:* Data entry acceptable

#### **Category 3: Sample Size**

*Criteria A:* Sample size meets program requirements

#### **Category 4: Calculations**

*Criteria A:* Calculations are written out

*Criteria B:* Calculations are correct

*Criteria C:* Formulas are written out

*Criteria D:* Formulas are correct

**Category 5: Species Identification**

*Criteria A:* Species ID forms are legible and neat

*Criteria B:* Species ID forms are completed for all new species seen

**Category 6: Observer Logbook**

*Criteria A:* All sections are completed

*Criteria B:* Vessel safety checks are mailed to coordinator prior to first trip

*Criteria C:* Scale calibration is completed according to protocol

*Criteria D:* Notes and descriptions are detailed

**Category 7: Attitude/Reliability/Flexibility**

*Criteria A:* Trips are not missed

*Criteria B:* Observer maintains professionalism with coordinator, debriefer, lead Observer, and other Observers

*Criteria C:* Observer interacts well with the fleet

*Criteria D:* Observer readily accepts assignments and tasks

*Criteria E:* Observer completes shore duties in a timely manner

**Category 8: Communication**

*Criteria A:* Calls from coordinator, debriefer, lead Observer, and other Observers are made/returned promptly and professionally

*Criteria B:* Calls to or from vessels are made / returned promptly and professionally

*Criteria C:* Calls to “Observer Trip Notification Phone System” are made promptly

*Criteria D:* Activity is completed promptly

The evaluation will include paragraphs regarding the specific category and criteria that the Observer excelled in or needs improvement in. There will not be a numerical

score. Observers are required to sign off on the evaluation in the Observer database. AOI will be monitoring this and contacting Observers who have not signed off on recent evaluations. The program hopes to encourage communication between debriefers and Observers by requiring Observers to sign off on their evaluations.

### *Maintaining WCGOP Observer Status*

Each year, Observers continuing with the program must:

- Maintain a current First Aid and CPR certification
- Pass a Fish Test
- Complete a WCGOP-approved Safety Training Course
- Participate in annual briefing and meeting